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STEVENSON'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN "STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE"

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ABSTRACT: This article undertakes an analysis of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, which advances the claim that his novella can be viewed as a philosophical study (more precisely, a thought experiment) on moral responsibility. A formal analysis of the novella's last chapter—in which Dr Jekyll explains the circumstances which lead to his demise—centered on Jekyll's explanations on his creation of Hyde, on his deictic choices when he speaks of Hyde (or of himself *as* Hyde), as well as on some recurring metaphors (i.e. the use of terms implying *kinship*, *sheltering* and *garments*) makes it plausible that, in a work interspersed with elements of the "penny dreadful" and the police novel, Stevenson might also have been carrying an ethico-cognitive study, and intentionally testing the limits of individual moral responsibility; his novella seems to have reached the conclusion that one cannot escape one's own conscience. Jekyll's death is not merely accidental, but a consequence of his initial misguided conclusions, the limitations of which his experience as Hyde would make evident.

KEYWORDS: *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Robert Louis Stevenson; moral responsibility.

> I was born in the year 18— to a large fortune, endowed besides with excellent parts, inclined by nature to industry, fond of the respect of the wise and good among my fellow-men, and thus, as might have been supposed, with every guarantee of an honourable and distinguished future. And indeed the worst of my faults was *a certain impatient gaiety of disposition*, such […] as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public. Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures; and that when I reached years of reflection, and began to look round me and take stock of my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life. (STEVENSON: 2003, pp.47-8; emphasis added.)

This is the introduction of Dr Jekyll's confession, placed as the last chapter of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (henceforth *Strange Case*). The identity between Dr Henry Jekyll and his obscure protégé, Mr Edward Hyde, had been disclosed in the previous chapter by Dr Hastie Lanyon's statement. Jekyll's confession, therefore, does not solve the mystery of their connection, but explains *how* and *why* it came to be; it also accounts for how and why it *failed*.

> And it chanced that the direction of my scientific studies, which led wholly towards the mystic and the transcendental, reacted and shed a strong light on this consciousness of the perennial war among my members. With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by *whose partial discovery* I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that *man is not truly one, but truly two*. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known *for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens*. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.48; emphasis added.)

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Jekyll's discovery of the duality (or plurality) of human beings is supposed to be responsible for his demise. Why does he claim that it was only partial? How did this imperfect knowledge lead to his death? The explanation lies in his intentions:

> …from an early date, […] I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved daydream, on the thought of the *separation of these elements* [the good and evil aspects of man]. If each, I told myself, could be *housed* in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the *aspirations and remorse* of his more upright *twin*; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and *no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence* by the hands of this extraneous evil. It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together—that in the agonised womb of consciousness, these *polar twins* should be continuously struggling. How, then were they dissociated? (STEVENSON: 2003, p.49. Emphasis added)

Jekyll wishes to away with *remorse* and *exposure*: as a respectable Londoner, he cannot be seen indulging in "undignified" pleasures (the adjective is his own), but he also does not wish to give them up. His Manichaean take on the *essential* constitution of man leads him to wish a separation of his multifarious self in *two separate individualities*: one utterly good, the other utterly evil.

> I began to perceive more deeply than it has ever yet been stated, the trembling immateriality, the mistlike transience, of this seemingly so solid body in which *we walk attired*. Certain agents I found to have the power to shake and pluck back that *fleshly vestment*, even as a wind might toss *the curtains of a pavilion*. […] I not only recognised my natural body from the mere aura and effulgence of certain of the powers that made up my spirit, but managed to compound a drug by which *these powers should be dethroned from their supremacy*, and *a second form and countenance substituted*, none the less natural to me because they were the expression, and bore the stamp of lower elements in my soul. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.49; emphasis added.)

Thus, with the assistance of chemical agents, Jekyll is able to produce a draught which not only unsettles or alters the hierarchical balance of his conscience (in a way similar to what alcohol might have done), but also transforms his body into a new shape, more in accordance with desires repressed by a sense of social decency but which, due to the power of the drug, gain prominence over his moral scruples.

It should be evident is that this unbalancing of one's psychological and bodily attributes is different from his original purpose of "housing in separate identities" the "polar twins" that make up one individual. Jekyll first seemed to be talking about *fission*: radically and permanently splitting one individual into two; now he seems to be talking about a mere disguise:

> I was the first [man] that could plod in the public eye with a load of genial respectability, and in a moment, like a schoolboy, *strip off these lendings* and spring headlong into the sea of liberty. But for me, in *my impenetrable mantle*, the safely was complete. Think of it—I did not even exist! Let me but escape into my laboratory door, give me but a second or two to mix and swallow the draught that I had always standing ready; and whatever he had done, Edward Hyde would pass away like the stain of breath upon a mirror; and there in his stead, quietly at home, trimming the midnight lamp in his study, a man who could afford to laugh at suspicion, would be Henry Jekyll. (STEVENSON: 2003, pp.52-3; emphasis added.)

Perhaps it is now simpler to understand why his conclusions were incomplete. Jekyll's problem is primarily *moral*, but his solution is *psychological*; he wishes to escape ascriptions of

moral responsibility, and seeks to do so by trifling with *personal identity*. He rightly guessed there is a very strict connection between the two, which, if broken, could afford him a means to such an escape. He fails because the *psychological solution* he intends to develop is far more radical than the *practical moral problem* it is destined to solve.

This article intends to use contemporary discussions on personal identity and moral responsibility to explain the last chapter of Stevenson's popular novella. It is at least possible to conceive it as a *thought experiment* on moral responsibility—that is, as a somewhat scientific experiment carried only mentally, by inductive and deductive reasoning, and which affords valid philosophical conclusions[2]. Early critics of *Strange Case* couldn't agree as to the moral status of the work[3]; it might be so because Stevenson wasn't so much preaching for or against any type of human behavior, but trying to understand the human psyche as related to moral subjects.

The next session will briefly explain some key aspects of the philosophical discussion of both personal identity and moral responsibility, while relating them to Stevenson's novella; the following session will highlight some textual aspects of Jekyll's aforementioned double take on the issue; finally, we return to explain how it is possible to present Jekyll's experiment as a thought experiment.

1. Personal identity and moral responsibility

1.1. Moral responsibility

Moral responsibility is related to specific reactions our actions (should) cause in other human beings. Upon seeing how other people behave, we may feel it is appropriate to encourage or condemn their behavior[4]. For now, we're not concerned with *why* this is; suffice to say that this *is*

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[2] James Robert Brown defines thought experiments as "devices of the imagination used to investigate the nature of things" (2009, online); according to him, it is common that "a real experiment that is the analogue of a thought experiment is impossible for physical, technological, or financial reasons; but this needn't be a defining condition […] The main point is that we seem able to get a grip on nature just by thinking" (ibid.). Now, it is obvious that no one has as yet been able to do exactly what Jekyll did: no one has been able to put forth both an alternative personality *and* an alternative bodily constitution to go along with it. In fact, even cases of Dissociative Identity Disorder are not sufficiently close to Stevenson's narrative: DID patients usually suffer from amnesia, and that is not at all the case with Jekyll, for one thing. Stevenson's description of what happens to Jekyll once Hyde comes into play follows more or less the same pattern of any unfeasible laboratorial experiment: it has to be thought through, and the application of inductive/deductive patterns of reasoning counts as a satisfactory experiment.

[3] The *Norton Critical Edition*'s collection of early reviews bears witness to this: some readers and reviewers, like Rev. Dr. Nicholson, thought it a parable or a sermon; others, like Andrew Lang, would only allow the work could be seen as one; others still, like the anonymous reviewer of *The Times* of London, would dismiss any intention on the part of Stevenson to preach; one private commentator, John Addington Symonds, even feared the work ruled out the possibility of moral redemption, and might thus be considered immoral (for all reviews, see STEVENSON: 2003, pp.93-104. Andrew Lang didn't actually signed the review mentioned; he is identified as probable author by *Norton Critical Edition*'s editor, Katherine Linehan.)

[4] When explaining Aristotle's seminal take on moral responsibility, Andrew Eshelman comments Aristotle is ambiguous when he speaks of the appropriateness of people's response to any action by a moral agent. Praise of blame could be appropriate in at least two different senses: they could be appropriate because the agent *deserves* praise or punishment (which will gives rise to the *merit-based view* on moral responsibility) or because we wish to *encourage/discourage* future similar actions on their part (which gives rise to a *consequentialist view*). As I don't think

how it is: "to be morally responsible for something, say an action, it to be worthy of a particular kind of reaction—praise, blame, or something akin to these—for having performed it" (ESHELMAN: 2009, online).

However, not all human beings qualify as moral agents:

> one is an apt candidate for praise of blame if and only if the action and/or disposition is voluntary. […] [A] voluntary action or trait must have two distinctive features. First, there is a control condition: […] it must be up to the agent whether to perform that action or posses the trait […]. Second […] the agent must be aware of what it is she is doing or bringing about. (Ibid.)

In everyday life, this seems pretty straightforward most of the times: you break it, you pay for it. One's actions afford that certain things are expected of one, or should happen to one. However, a formal, philosophical account of why this is so encounters various problems: Why is this the case? What type of actions should merit what types of reactions? What criteria are/should be adopted to account for this relation? Our present discussion is out of the strictly moral realm, but has direct bearing on it: As, generally speaking, one can only be held accountable for one's own actions, how do we define that one is identical with oneself? How do we *formalize* the relation of *identity*?

1.2. Identity and personal identity

Harold Noonan comments that *identity* means "sameness"; unfortunately, he continues, both *identity* and *sameness* have various different meanings (2009, online). A primary distinction to be made is between *numerical* and *qualitative* identity:

> To say that this and that are numerically identical is to say that they are one and the same: one thing rather than two. This is different form *qualitative identity*. Things are qualitatively identical when they are exactly similar. […] A past or future person needn't, at that past or future time, be exactly like you are now in order to be you—that is, in order to be numerically identical with you. You don't remain qualitatively the same throughout your life. (OLSON: 2008, online)

Thus Dr Henry Jekyll, the well-respected scientist (X at t_1), is found to be numerically identical with Mr Edward Hyde, a young scoundrel of unknown origins (Y at t_2): they are one and the same being ($X = Y$).

As a philosophical issue, personal identity is not an undivided problem. Eric Olson says "[t]here is no single problem of personal identity, but rather a wide range of loosely connected questions" (2008, online); he lists eight such questions, six of which are pertinent to our present purposes: (1) *what am I?* (concerning our metaphysical status); (2) *who am I?* (concerning our uniqueness as individuals); (3) *persistence* (identity over time or diachronic identity); (4) *personhood* (concerning criteria for one to count as a person); (5) *evidence* (concerning criteria for knowing who is who); (6) *what matters in identity?* (concerning practical consequences of personal

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the two views are mutually excluding, I tried to pose the problem it a way which, even though it sounds slightly consequentialist, is sufficiently ambiguous to accommodate both.

identity). Question (6) has been dealt with: practical consequences, in *Strange Case*, are moral and legal; question (2) is related to the Narrative Approach to the Persistence Question (see 1.2.2.3.), and so need no separate account; we will proceed now to summarize the remaining four.

1.2.1. Identity as metaphysical status

The "what am I?" question has to do with our metaphysical nature. Am I a monadic, immutable substance, a state or merely a process? Jekyll, as we saw, seems to believe in something roughly describable as a non-monadic, clashing array of substances: "a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.48). He also sees body and mind as connected in such a way that the body could be altered to become more akin to certain aspects of the mind.

1.2.2. The Persistence Question: diachronic identity

This is perhaps the central issue, and the one that has attracted more contemporary attention. What does it take for the same person to persist at different times? Which past or future human being is you? What *adventures* could make you cease to exist? In Stevenson's novella, this question appears as follows: How do we know Jekyll persists even when Hyde is prominent? At one point, Jekyll calls Hyde's transformation back into his "upright twin" a "temporary suicide" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.61); how do we know this is a metaphor, and not a factual statement?

Of all possible answers that could be given to the Persistence Question, the three which seem to come handiest to our present purposes are the following:

1.2.2.1. The Psychological Approach

This is the most widely held view; it states that "some psychological relation is necessary of sufficient (or both) for one to persist" (OLSON: 2008, online):

> *X* at t_1 is the same person as *Y* at t_2 if and only if *X* is *uniquely psychologically continuous* with *Y*, where psychological continuity *consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness*, itself consisting in significant numbers of direct psychological connections like memories, intentions, beliefs/goals/desires, and similarity of character. (SHOEMAKER: 2008, online; emphasis added.)

Jekyll holds a view similar to this. His initial statement that one individual is "a polity of incongruous denizens" can be thus rephrased in contemporary terminology: psychological continuity is not necessarily harmonious; one's ideas, feelings and tastes may not all be in agreement, yet they all are available to one's consciousness, and are a part of "who one is". Jekyll wishes to create a second identity so at least two of these elements can be free of one another's

company; he wishes to break up certain aspects of his unique psychological continuity, with a view to moral gains.

Saying that this relation is unique means it must hold exclusively one-one; it cannot hold one-many, as might be the case when one undergoes fission. If Jekyll had severed his psychological constituents into two different human beings, he would have ceased to exist, and two different men (however psychologically continuous with him) would have sprung in his stead. Besides, we need to bear in mind that, for unique psychological continuity to obtain, not all elements need to persist at all times: our ideas and tastes may change, we may acquire new tastes, learn new things are forget old ones. The claim of psychological continuity does not imply that all these elements be forever with us in order for us to persist; it only states that they be *connected*: if Jekyll is no longer on amicable terms with Lanyon, he once was; he remembers Lanyon, remembers being Lanyon's friend, and it is easy to see how like and dislike of the same person are, however different, connected.

The precise definition of what types of psychological connectedness there are, and what types are necessary to afford psychological continuity[5] is still a matter of debate. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the key to Jekyll's failure lies in psychological continuity: Jekyll is uniquely and strongly psychological connected with Hyde *in the right way*: he remembers Hyde's experiences as his own, he feels legitimate remorse for them; they share "certain phenomena of consciousness", they are "knit" to one another "closer than a wife, closer than an eye" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.61). And yet, there seems to be legitimate grounds for believing in Jekyll's honesty when he, in certain moments, expresses the mutual estrangement between Hyde and him:

> And certainly the hate that now divided them was equal on each side. With Jekyll, it was a thing of vital instinct. He had now seen the full deformity of that creature that shared with him some of the phenomena of consciousness, and was *co-heir with him to death*: and beyond these links of community, […] The hatred of Hyde for Jekyll was of a different order. His terror of the gallows drove him continually to *commit temporary suicide*, and return to his *subordinate station of a part instead of a person*; but he loathed the necessity, he loathed the despondency into which Jekyll was now fallen, and he resented the dislike with which he was himself regarded. […] I, who sicken and freeze at the mere thought of him [Hyde], when I recall the abjection and passion of this attachment [for life], and when I know how he fears my power *to cut him off by suicide*, I find it in my heart to pity him. (STEVENSON: 2003, pp.60-1; emphasis added.)

1.2.2.2. The Biological Approach

However popular, an account of personal identity centered around the psyche runs into some problems with certain liminal stages of human life: if personal identity is taken to be the identity of persons *as persons*, it wouldn't be coherent to say one is numerically identity with a fetus, or a

[5] For example: when Lanyon shares his knowledge of Jekyll's case with Utterson, psychological elements of his constitution are connected to those of Utterson's, but that connection doesn't afford psychological continuity: Utterson's psyche doesn't *fuse with* Lanyon's because he learned something from him; however, if Utterson, five years from his learning about Jekyll, still remembers it, this memory does contribute to *Utterson-five-years-later* being the same person as *Utterson-five-years-ago*.

corpse—both of which lack the psychological structure necessary for personhood. As it seems truly incoherent to say we weren't once fetuses, the psychological approach competes with a view which sees one primarily as "a biological organism, a human animal. […]: if *X* is a person at t_1, and *Y* exists at any other time, then *X* = *Y* if and only if *Y*'s biological organism is continuous with *X*'s biological organism" (SHOEMAKER: 2008, online). According to this view, one (that is, one taken as [once-]living organisms) can be numerically identical with an embryo, a fetus, a person in a vegetative state or a corpse.

Besides psychological continuity, and in spite of the striking differences in appearance, Jekyll and Hyde do share the same biological organism. The tension between homicide and suicide hinted in Jekyll's confession (Jekyll can "cut Hyde off by suicide" because they are "co-heirs to death") testifies to this. Thus Jekyll's experiment was insufficient on both psychological and biological grounds to cause true fission and "house" his opposing components into separate identities.

1.2.2.3. The Narrative Approach

There is, however, a third ground upon which Jekyll might try and effect this separation: he may tell a life-story, which would account for *who he really is*. David Shoemaker explains this approach as follows:

> what makes an action, experience, or psychological characteristic properly attributable to some person (and thus a proper part or his or her identity) is its correct incorporation into the self-told story of his or her life […]. Narrative identity is thus really about a kind of psychological unity, but not just an artless or random unity. (SHOEMAKER: 2008, online.)

Therefore, the Narrative Approach could be seen as a subset of the Psychological Approach—after all, personal narrative is a mental activity, and draws upon mental elements responsible for psychological continuity, such as memory, which, in its turn, it may help to reinforce and even alter (see STERNBERG: 2000). Critics to this approach claim that it is not always necessary that a story told is true, nor is it true that everybody is in the habit of telling their life-stories, or perceives their own lives as unified ongoing tales. But it is true that at least part of our identity (of "who we are" in the sense of our uniqueness as individuals) draws on the things we say about ourselves.

Strange Case would provide rich ground for discussion of this approach to identity, since the chapter we're analyzing is a description of Dr Henry Jekyll's life—one in which we clearly see his struggle with Hyde, and just how slippery personal narratives can be: sadly for him, not even here he is entirely in control; his estrangement with Hyde isn't always constant, and might even be considered a bit contrived at times:

> Instantly the spirit of hell awoke in me and raged. With a transport of glee, I mauled the unresisting body, tasting delight from every blow; and it was not till weariness had begun to succeed, that I was suddenly, in the top fit of my delirium, struck through the heart by a cold thrill of terror. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.56)

> … I looked about me with so black a countenance as made the attendants tremble; not a look did they exchange in my presence; but obsequiously took my orders, led me to a private room, and brought me wherewithal to write. Hyde in danger of his life was a creature new to me; shaken with inordinate anger, strung to the pitch of murder, lusting to inflict pain. Yet the creature was astute; mastered his fury with a great effort of the will; […] when the night was fully come, he set forth in the corner of a closed cab, and was driven to and fro about the streets of the city. *He, I say—I cannot say, I.* That child of Hell had nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.59; emphasis added.)

> Henry Jekyll stood at times aghast before the acts of Edward Hyde; but the situation was apart from ordinary laws, and insidiously relaxed the grasp of conscience. It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired; he would even make haste, where it was possible, to undo the evil done by Hyde. And thus his conscience slumbered.
>
> Into the details of the infamy at which I thus connived (for even now I can scarce grant that I committed it) I have no design of entering; […] (Stevenson: 2003, p.53.)

These three passages afford excellent examples of how Jekyll's use of pronouns shifts constantly—and probably against his better judgment. He doesn't speak uniformly of himself in the first person, nor of Hyde in the third: when relating the murder of Carew and Hyde's quick action in the scene where Jekyll metamorphoses while sitting in a park bench, Jekyll speaks in first person: he is "I" when he recounts Carew being clubbed to death, and "I" when he nearly throws a driver off his cart for having laughed at him. From the other passages, it seems evident he wishes to dissociate himself from responsibility for Hyde's crimes, but when he actually *describes* them—that is, when memory and its associated emotions takes hold of him—his deictic choices place responsibility on *Jekyll*. In the second passage, we see the moment when he starts analyzing Hyde's actions ("Hyde in danger of his life was a creature new to me"), regains authorial control, and denies agency; in the third, he is even capable of speaking as a third-person narrator, distancing himself from both Jekyll and Hyde in order to analyze them; he goes as far as claiming to have been only an accomplice by omission (he "connived" but not "committed").

As both the psychological and the biological answers to the Persistence Question, the narrative approach also seems to indicate that Jekyll is sufficiently continuous with Hyde in all the right ways; still, there does seem to be between them a level of separation which blurs responsibility ascriptions.

1.2.3. Identity as reidentification

How do we find out who is who? Literature is already familiar with this problem: the Aristotelian criterion of recognition in tragedy has precisely to do with evidence of personal identity. It may be already evident that this is central issue here, as reidentification is the key to moral responsibility: *X* can only be held accountable for *X*'s action if he is *recognized* as being *X*.

Given the usual human constitution, identity as reidentification draws heavily upon the Biological Approach to the Persistence Question:

> …ordinarily what grounds legal responsibility is something like a physical criterion of identity: as long as *X* and *Y* have the same DNA, then they are the same person, and so Y can justly be held responsible for the crimes of *X*. But it is clear that these physical strands are merely contingent[6], albeit reliable, indicators of the identity-condition that actually matters, viz., some form of psychological relation. (SHOEMAKER: 2008, online.)

In order to thwart responsibility ascriptions, Jekyll creates not only a new personality, but a new bodily constitution to go along with it. The transformation is so complete that even age and stature are different: Hyde simply cannot be Jekyll in disguise, because the latter is shorter than the former. In chapter VIII, there is a long argument between Poole, Dr Jekyll's butler, and Mr Utterson; the two men argue whether or not the creature locked in Jekyll's laboratory is Poole's master or not, which shows just how successful Jekyll was in preventing reidentification: Poole has Utterson hear Jekyll's voice; Utterson concedes the voice sounds changed, but argues that it wouldn't make sense for the murderer to stay. Poole says that whoever is in the cabinet has been crying and asking for some medicine which he cannot find, and shows Utterson of one the supposed murderer's notes; Utterson points that that is Jekyll's handwriting. Poole undermines the importance of handwriting and claims to have seen the murderer wearing a mask; Utterson concludes Jekyll's suffering from a disease that deforms the body; Poole says the man inside the cabinet is not as tall as Jekyll; Utterson promises to open the cabinet door—at this point, and after a careful scrutiny of various body-related signs of numerical identity, he is convinced the man inside Jekyll's laboratory (whom he suspects to be Hyde) cannot be Jekyll.

1.2.4. Criteria of personhood

What is it to be a person, or what *counts* for one to be a person? At what point do we start being/cease to be persons? This is related the above problem of identifying non-personal, biological stages of our constitution with our nature *as* persons. It is worth of note that, at one point, Jekyll deplores Hyde's prominence in calling him an aspect, not a being:

> he thought of Hyde, for all his energy of life, as of something not only hellish but *inorganic*. This was the shocking thing; that *the slime of the pit* seemed to utter cries and voices; that the *amorphous dust* gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.60; emphasis added.)

Is Hyde a person? Psychologically speaking, just how autonomous is he from Jekyll? Hyde poses moral challenges similar to those posed by DID patients: are the different personalities of one patient persons or persons in their own right? If so, shouldn't eliminating them be considered murder?

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[6] As we live in as era where cosmetic surgery and face transplants are possible, it is easier for us to see that physical identity bears no *necessary* relation to psychological continuity, even though in most cases seeing someone absolutely identical to *X* implies that we are seeing *X*.

1.3. Further problems of moral responsibility related to personal identity

The previous session demonstrated why personal identity matters to responsibility ascriptions: one can only be responsible for what one does or leaves undone. But it isn't necessary that one numerically identical with oneself will be held accountable for one's actions all the time: besides the two Aristotelian conditions (which provide for cases when one's actions aren't *voluntarily* one's own: cases of dementia, sleepwalking, being held at gunpoint etc), there is the issue of *person-slices*.

One's life may be divided in moments, according either to some explicit narrative claim (i.e. my life changed after my divorce) or according to certain level of disharmony: a change in beliefs or tastes, the learning of new things etc. These briefer versions of one are one's *person-slices*, and their duration varies as follows: (01) *Living human beings*: humans viewed as biological organisms; responsibility cannot hold throughout the entire duration of a human animal, because there are certain stages when it is not yet or not anymore a person. (02) *Persons*. (03) *Selves*: person-slices unified by strong psychological connectedness, but not enduring as long as persons. It is conceivable that some of *X*'s deeds wouldn't be ascribable to *X*'s future or past selves[7]. (04) *Atoms*: momentary experiencers. Atoms cannot be moral agents; the criterion of continuity of this person-slice is just too thin for responsibility to hold from one moment to the next. *X-sleeping-atom* (that is, *X* as an experiencer of sleep) wouldn't be held accountable *X-thief-self* (*X* as an agent-experiencer of theft).

Once again, responsibility ascriptions obtain from *X* to *Y* if there is psychological continuity of *the right kind*. This is one of the puzzles in *Strange Case*: even if we assume that Hyde is merely an aspect of Dr Jekyll's personality and not a full-blown individual, the disharmony between the nature of his pleasures and those of the doctor and his lack of "bonds of obligation" make him prone to acts that would be neither pleasurable nor desirable to Dr Jekyll:

> The pleasures which I made haste to seek in my disguise were, as I have said, undignified […]. But in the hands of Edward Hyde, they soon began to turn toward the monstrous. When I would come back from these excursions, I was often plunged into a kind of wonder at my vicarious depravity. This *familiar* that I called out of my own soul, and sent forth alone to do his good pleasure, was a being inherently malign and villainous; his every act and thought centered on self; drinking pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another; relentless like a man of stone. Henry Jekyll stood at times aghast before the acts of Edward Hyde; but the situation was apart from ordinary laws, and *insidiously relaxed the grasp of conscience*. It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired; he would even make haste, where it was possible, to undo the evil done by Hyde. And thus his conscience slumbered. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.53; emphasis added.)

[7] For example: the psychological traces which made *X-child-self* accountable for breaking people's windows with a football may vanish as he grows old; *X-preteen-self* may no longer break windows with his football—he may refrain from breaking them precisely *because* he has come to realize it is wrong to do so. Would it be right to hold *X-preteen-self* accountable for the windows *X-child-self* broke? From a legal standpoint, the argument of psychological disharmony between person-slices may alleviate a future self's responsibility, but it doesn't suspend it: if *X* is a thief and, later in life, honestly repents his previous deeds, his *X-repented-self* would still go to prison for theft.

Jekyll couldn't foresee that his evil side, once furnished with some level of individuality, would take up pleasures distinct from and more malignant than those it was originally intended to satisfy. We may even suspect some of the things Jekyll says in his confession are intended only to free him of Hyde's guilt, but we must admit that, to some extent, his crimes are different than Hyde's. Under the discussion of person-slices, it becomes less clear whether Jekyll should be held (entirely) accountable for the murder of Sir Danvers Carew.

2. Remarks on the relation between Jekyll and Hyde: two sets of metaphors

As we can see, there are many ways in which we can understand Dr Jekyll's failure; all of them, however, stem from what was stated in the beginning: there is a clash between his instrumental use of Hyde (rather their reciprocally instrumental use of each other) and the psychological condition to which he was brought when he created Hyde.

In order for us to have a clear understanding of the clash between Jekyll's intended use of Hyde and its actual consequences, we may pay attention to two groups of recurrent metaphors in Jekyll's speech—some occurrences of which were already highlighted in the passages quoted so far. Let us first analyze the metaphors related to the moral aspect: Jekyll and Hyde are supposed to deviate moral and legal accountability from each other. Jekyll calls the human body the "fortress of identity"; as we saw, he is right, given that bodily similitude is the strongest, most visible indicator of psychological continuity (if only *contingently* so). Thus Jekyll thinks of the body as a shield against moral scrutiny, a tissue that dresses the naked soul. This is why his solution must necessarily alter the body: to further fortify his fortress.

He constantly employs two sets of metaphors which denote his rather instrumental take on his discovery: he speaks of the body as *garments* or as a *building*—two categories of objects meant for *protection*: against nature, against physical violence, against moral scrutiny. Some of the passages already quoted show this: he spoke of elements being *housed* in separate identities, of human beings walking *attired* in their bodies, of the body as a *fleshy vestment*.

This metaphor was also specifically applied to Jekyll's body as well as Hyde's: we already heard him speak of *stripping off* Hyde's body, and of wearing his own as an *impenetrable mantle*; we may add another similar instance: "I had but to drink the cup, to *doff* at once the body of the noted professor, and to assume, *like a thick cloak*, that of Edward Hyde" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.52; emphasis added). It persists even when, after the murder of Carew, it is no longer with pleasure that neither Jekyll nor Hyde think of having to "dress" of "dwell in" the other's body: "Hyde was indifferent to Jekyll, or but remembered him as the mountain bandit remembers the *cavern* in which he conceals himself from pursuit" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.55; emphasis added). As for Jekyll, he

becomes Hyde's "*city of refuge*; let but Hyde peep out an instant, and the hands of all men would be raised to take and slay him" (id. p.57; emphasis added).

This mutual hide-and-seek forces each personality to become an aspect of the self, instead of the full individual, "a part instead of a person". The two competing personalities can neither dissociate themselves nor define their hierarchical role in relation to each other. Hence, a different number of terms implying *kinship* is used to refer to them. We've seen Jekyll speak of the good and evil side of human beings as "polar twins"; we've heard him speak of Jekyll as being "closer to him than a wife"; we might add up one more example: "Jekyll had more than a father's interest; Hyde had more than a son's indifference" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.55; emphasis added). Hyde is Jekyll's creation, in a sense, but he is made up of things which have always co-existed with other aspects of Jekyll's life—and co-existed in more or less equal terms:

> Though so profound a double-dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering. (Stevenson: 2003, p.48.)

> And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. *This, too, was myself*. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine. (Id. p.51; emphasis added.)

Just in the same way metaphors of protection (the body as garments, the body as a house) show the moral safety Jekyll intends to gain from his experiment, metaphors of kinship add up to the psychological complexity which was described in the previous session. By making two personalities numerically identical with each other (in a way similar but not identical to what happens to DID patients), Jekyll only unsettles his previous, Manichaean psychological poise: when Utterson, upon seeing Hyde's dead body, suspects "he was looking on the body of a self-destroyer" (STEVENSON: 2003, p.39), we may understand this expression in a way more rigorous than he would have; it is not only the body of a suicide, but the body of a many who capable or destroying the *self*.

3. Conclusion

So far, we have used contemporary philosophy and a lexical analysis to explain Jekyll and Hyde's strange case. The only thing left for us now is to show how this can be viewed as an experiment on moral responsibility.

When Stevenson wrote *Strange Case*, he was concerned with the problem of the duality of man's nature. His previous attempt at tackling the issue—the short-story "Markheim"—had been written not long before *Strange Case*. Markheim, like Jekyll, is a man who claims to love goodness, but who has succumbed to various different forms of evil deeds, including murder. Markheim resorts to social determinism to justify his actions:

> I was born and I have lived in a land of giants; giants have dragged me by the wrists since I was born of my mother—the giants of circumstance. And you [the Devil] would judge me by my acts! But can you not look within? Can you not understand that evil is hateful to me? Can you not see within me the clear writing of conscience, never blurred by any willful sophistry, although too often disregarded? Can you not read me for a thing that surely must be common as humanity—the unwilling sinner? (STEVENSON: 2003, p.115.)
>
> Hitherto I have been driven with revolt to what I would not; I was bond-slave to poverty, driven and scourged. (Id. p.117.)

But, in the end, he opts out of it: instead of accepting the help the devil offers him "as a gift", he frees himself of his deterministic account by turning himself in. By voluntarily accepting punishment, he avoids a life of "unwilling sinfulness".

"Markheim"'s treatment of good and evil gravitates around the old quarrel between determinism and freedom. Still not satisfied, Stevenson found what he thought to be a better treatment in *Strange Case*. His treatment becomes less markedly moral, because more seriously oriented by a question. Jekyll's question—could the opposing aspects of human nature be separated?—is being proposed to the reader in dead earnestness, and it at least is conceivable that the novella is intended to test the (moral) limits of this duality.

More than once, Jekyll explicitly tell us his experiment failed. The second time, he says:

> I have been made to learn that the doom and burthen of our life is bound for ever on man's shoulders, and when the attempt is made to cast it off, it but returns upon us with more unfamiliar and more awful pressure. (STEVENSON: 2003, p.49.)

This "doom and burthen", this thing he wants to cast off, is, as I have intended to demonstrate, moral responsibility. Stevenson's novella tests the possibility of one being freed of the two implications of moral responsibility: Jekyll wishes to avoid being held accountable for his pleasure not only by *others*, but by *himself*. Are there circumstances under which it would be *impossible* for a man to be in any degree morally responsible for his own voluntary, conscious actions? Stevenson seems to reason that, since it is identity with oneself that warrants responsibility ascriptions, if one were *two*, one might be rid of undesired accountability—internal and external. From here, he proceeds to analyse whether it is possible for a man to be two, and whether this would afford him his desired moral freedom.

Even if from a strictly organic point of view, Jekyll and Hyde are still numerically identical, their shapes, being so different as they are, can disguise their identity relation pretty well—we saw how difficult it was for Poole and Utterson to agree on whether it was Jekyll locked in his laboratory—, but doesn't afford them separate existence. It is even more unfortunate that they cannot gain total psychological independence; Jekyll remembers Hyde's deeds, and, as we saw, even narrates them in first person; he therefore cannot avoid guilt and remorse.

Now, if Jekyll had been entirely successful in separating himself from his evil side—if he had produced perfect *fission* between them—, his experiment would have been psychologically successful (even if, as some philosophers suggest, Jekyll would be numerical identical with neither of the two beings which sprang form him, and therefore would be as good as dead), but useless from his own standpoint. Jekyll doesn't wish to suppress or abandon his "undignified" pleasures; had he wished to do so, other mind-controlling drugs might have done the trick. If Hyde were totally freed from Jekyll, the latter would not be touched by the pleasures of the former, and would be left in the same state as he was before. (Besides, his so wishing would go against the design of the experiment: if he wished to eliminate his bad deeds, then how could we test whether he can commit them and not *in any way* be held or hold himself responsible for them?) Therefore, Hyde is only useful to Jekyll if they are separated but united; this might be what Jekyll fails to understand, and what causes both his experiment to fail. Jekyll's failure in ridding himself of both guilt for Hyde's actions and their consequences firmly answers the question of whether it is possible to rid oneself of accountability for one's deeds, and leads Jekyll to his conclusion: "the doom and burthen of our life is bound for ever on man's shoulders", that is, moral responsibility is inalienable.

It is, then, possible to conceive Stevenson's piece as a work akin to philosophical experiments; before talk of brain transplants and fission began to influence discussions on identity and ethics, Stevenson had already proposed a case of quasi-fission which foreshadows much future discussion on the subject. As was already said, the result is not moral in the sense of preaching a lesson; it is moral in the sense of affording a reasonable contribution to the discussion of moral problems.

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A FILOSOFIA MORAL DE STEVENSON EM “O MÉDICO E O MONSTRO”

RESUMO: O presente artigo expõe uma análise da novela *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [O médico e o monstro] (1886), do escritor escocês Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94), que visa sustentar a proposição de que a novela seja encarada como um estudo filosófico (mais precisamente, como um experimento mental) acerca da responsabilidade moral. Uma análise formal do último capítulo da novela—no qual Dr Jekyll explica em carta as circunstâncias que levaram a seu desaparecimento—, centrada na explanação das intenções de Jekyll ao criar Hyde, nos dêiticos empregados quando Jekyll fala de Hyde (ou de si como Hyde), bem como em algumas metáforas recorrentes (tais como o uso de termos denotando *parentesco*, *abrigo* ou *indumentária*), torna bastante plausível a hipótese de que, em uma obra onde se mesclam elementos do conto de terror e do conto policial, Stevenson estivesse também elaborando um estudo de natureza ético-cognitiva, e propositadamente testando os limites da responsabilidade moral individual; a conclusão a que parece chegar é a de que o homem não pode fugir de sua consciência. A morte de Jekyll não é uma fatalidade, mas fruto de um lapso em seu pensamento inicial, que sua experiência como Hyde viria a apontar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Robert Louis Stevenson; responsabilidade moral.